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SUBJECT: NO BREAKTHROUGH IN 2007 FOR GAY RIGHTS IN
SINGAPORE

REF: A. SINGAPORE 1404
[1](#)B. SINGAPORE 394

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia L. Herbold for reason 1.4(d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: 2007 turned out not to be the breakthrough year for gay rights in Singapore that advocates had hoped it would be. After an extended and spirited public debate fueled by founding father Lee Kuan Yew (LKY), Singapore retained a statute (Section 377A) banning sex between men. A series of surprising LKY public statements early this year had energized activists, who hoped to take advantage of a comprehensive overhaul of the Penal Code to repeal Section 377A. An online repeal petition drew support, especially from among the professional classes, and then was submitted during parliamentary debate by a "nominated" (i.e., appointed and nonpartisan) MP. But ruling and opposition party MP's fought back, saying they were sticking up for the conservative "heartland." In announcing the outcome, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong indicated the law would eventually be changed and, meanwhile, not be enforced -- an unusual approach in legalistic Singapore. LKY had foreshadowed that precise approach months earlier. End Summary.

Lee Kuan Yew: the Liberalizer?

[1](#)2. (C) 2007 turned out not to be a breakthrough year for gay rights in Singapore, disappointing advocates who had hoped for a major change. Since Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong came to office in 2004, the Government of Singapore (GOS) has consciously loosened social controls in an effort to give the country a reputation for "buzz," even as the government has maintained tight political controls (Ref B.) The government has promoted the arts, licensed casinos, permitted racy billboards, and even allowed topless revues. This could not have happened without at least the tacit approval of Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, who still towers over Singapore public life seventeen years after passing on the premiership. Still, some have wondered how comfortable LKY is with these changes, given his reputation for "Victorian" sensibilities.

[1](#)3. (SBU) So it was a bit surprising when LKY helped spark a public debate through a series of public comments about homosexuality, beginning with a meeting early this year with young ruling party activists at a popular night club. As reported in the press, LKY told the group, "You take this business of homosexuality. If in fact it is true that you are genetically born a homosexual because that's the nature of the genetic random transmission of genes, you can't help it. So why should we criminalize it? You have to take a practical, pragmatic approach to what I see is an inevitable force of time and circumstance." In August, LKY told New York Times interviewers that liberalized policies toward gays in Singapore was a "matter of time." But due to the sensitivities of "conservative older" Muslim, Chinese and Indian segments of the population, Singapore would take an "ambiguous" position, he added. "We say, O.K., leave them

alone, but let's leave the law as it is for the time being."

Petitioning the GOS

14. (C) Notwithstanding LKY's foreshadowing of the outcome, activists and bloggers quickly took up the cause in an effort to have Article 377A, banning sex between men, repealed as part of the broader penal code reform. (Note: There is no provision of law in Singapore that bans sex between women, but the idea that Article 377A involves gender discrimination against men did not become a significant issue in the Article 377A debate. End Note.) An on-line petition appeared on a gay rights group website, Global Voices Online, and was widely circulated by email, eventually garnering nearly 3,000 signatures. While political apathy is the norm in Singapore, many noteworthy citizens signed the petition, including multinational company executives, engineers, teachers, local media celebrities, as well as civil society activists. Alex Au, co-founder of the gay rights organization "People Like Us", told us he was pleased with the public response, and noted that previous on-line petitions had not been particularly effective in promoting change.

No Repeal

15. (SBU) However, in the weeks leading up to the parliamentary session, local media began to carry stories on the conservative views of Singaporeans and their strong support for traditional family values. The government-influenced Straits Times newspaper published a survey reporting that over two-thirds of Singaporeans held negative attitudes toward homosexuality. MP Sin Boon Ann

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observed in the article that the survey reflected the traditional values of Singaporeans. After a long period of public comment, the GOS submitted to Parliament in October the final draft Penal Code revision bill, which retained Section 377A.

Backing Up the GOS Position

16. (U) When Parliament debated the Penal Code revision bill and NMP Siew Kum Hong's petition later the same day, nine ruling People's Action Party (PAP) MPs joined the debate to support retention of Section 377A. The MPs said the petition had prompted residents in their wards to contact them to express their support for keeping the ban. MP Dr. Muhammad Faishal claimed the Malay/Muslim community wanted to preserve the traditional family unit at a time when it is threatened by rising divorce rates, single-parent households and work pressure. MP Ong Kian Min insisted that, "Singaporeans simply are not ready to change their family values and endorse homosexuality as normal." MP Hri Kumar agreed with keeping Section 377A, but noted that it was "virtually impossible" to enforce (There were only eight convictions under 377A from 1988 to 2003, according to press reports.) Perhaps the most impassioned speech in the parliamentary debate was given by NMP Thio Li-ann, who made headlines by likening anal sex to "shoving a straw up your nose to drink." Thio warned that repeal of 377A would be only the beginning of efforts to "subvert social morality" in Singapore. She was called names and received hate mail and even a death threat (decidedly un-Singaporean behavior), but told the media that the vast majority of the correspondence she received encouraged her to "stand firm" in upholding her convictions. The revised Penal Code, including 377A, passed with only one dissenting vote, that of NMP Siew who had submitted the on-line petition to Parliament.

Because I Told You So

¶17. (C) Alex Au told us that in a meeting of "People Like Us" with several MPs following the parliamentary session, he had asked how they knew that the majority of their constituents had a negative view of homosexuality and whether they had used polling to solicit opinions. The MPs had responded that senior ministers in the government had told them it was so. "Presumably," Au said, "the senior ministers will also tell them when the majority of Singaporeans are ready to accept the gay community." Even some PAP MPs are not happy with the GOS position. MP Charles Chong told us he backed the repeal. Simply relying on the view of the "majority" of Singaporeans was faulty as they had also supported some "reprehensible" laws which had allowed rape in marriage, argued MP Chong.

Opposition Lines Up with Government

¶18. (SBU) Singapore's only two opposition MPs joined the GOS in opposing the petition. Non-Constituency MP and Workers' Party Chairman Sylvia Lim voted against it and said in Parliament that "...after much deliberation, we are unable to arrive at consensus that it (Section 377A) should be repealed." Workers' Party MP Low Thia Kiang even praised the government for its handling of the debate as a "sign of greater openness." He added that people are "more vocal and more comfortable to air their views in public" and went on to say that he would never "oppose the government simply for the sake of opposing."

Mobilizing the Heartland

¶19. (C) MP Cynthia Phua told us she was pleased that the public debate took place. The grassroots network kicked in once the heartland heard about the petition to repeal Section 377A and people organized themselves so that their voices were heard, she said. Phua thought this boded well for the future. The political scene in Singapore, she asserted, is "more transparent and inclusive" than when she entered Parliament more than a decade ago. "Step by step, they are learning to take an active role in civil society." However, MP Lim Biow Chuan told us that the job of the government in Singapore is "to decide what is best for the people and then convince them to go along."

Change Will Come, Just Later

¶10. (U) After the decision to retain Article 377A, PM Lee, who remained silent during Parliament's first day of debate, told a group of university students that Singapore had to balance between maintaining traditional, heterosexual values

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and giving homosexuals space to live their lives. Until there is a broader consensus on decriminalizing homosexual sex, Singapore will stick to the status quo," he said. However, at the close of the Parliamentary debate, PM Lee assured citizens that while the statute would remain on the books, the law would not be actively enforced.

Comment

¶11. (C) The unusually spirited public debate over repeal of Article 377A reflects an ongoing "social opening" as the GOS tries to recast Singapore as a cutting edge (as well as stable and secure) place to visit and live. More characteristically, it was part of carefully managed political exercise in which senior GOS leaders established the parameters of discourse and then steered the machinery of government to a preordained outcome. LKY's prominent role suggests he remains, even in semi-retirement, the brains and master tactician behind Singapore's social engineering. However surprising his nod toward gay rights, his solution

was vintage LKY; i.e., utterly pragmatic. As he told the New York Times in a recent, unrelated interview, Singapore must "go in whatever direction world conditions dictate"; if we are not connected to this modern world" we'll go back to the fishing village we once were." In effect, the GOS message to gay activists was "yes, the ban on homosexuality is unfair and will be repealed in time; in the meantime, we'll leave you alone."

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